

Cambodian community talks about troubled past, looks to the future

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It's been three decades since the Khmer Rouge killing fields, and Sochanny Meng still has nightmares. Meng, 49, came to the United States as a refugee from Cambodia, where between 1975 and 1979 the brutal Khmer Rouge regime killed 1.7 million people – one-fifth of the country's population – through overwork, starvation, torture and execution.

“Why my people killed my people like that ... I don't understand that,” says Meng, whose mother was executed by the Khmer Rouge. “I still don't understand.”

In April, Meng will sit down in front of a camera for an interview about his past. What happened to him in Cambodia? What did he see? How did he survive? His questioners won't be historians, reporters or documentarians but his American-born sons, 20 year-old twins Kenny and Jimmy.

The family is part of an oral history documentary project organized by the Cambodian-American Community of Oregon (CACO). With \$60,000 in grants from the Northwest Health Foundation and Vision into Action, CACO is training Cambodian-American youths to interview their own parents and grandparents about their experiences under the Khmer Rouge. The interviews will be filmed and compiled into a 20-minute documentary, which will screen for the community and the public in August.

CACO President Mardine Mao says many of the community's elders have rarely – if ever – spoken about their history before. Instead, they try their hardest to bury the painful memories.

“We feel like our younger generation don't know much (about what happened), because their parents don't tell them,” Mao says. “We're asking them, basically, to open up a can of worms.”

The Khmer Rouge rose to power in Cambodia after years of guerilla warfare, aggravated by spillover from the U.S. campaign in Vietnam. Led by Pol Pot, the totalitarian regime imposed a radical system of agrarian communism, forcing millions of people out of cities and into farm labor camps. Children were separated from their families to be indoctrinated, put to work and sometimes trained as child soldiers. People who were educated, in ethnic minorities, religious or accused of disagreeing with the ruling party were tortured and killed.

Oregon and Southwest Washington are home to an estimated 5,000 to 10,000 Cambodian-Americans, many of whom lived through the Khmer Rouge years and came here as refugees in the early 1980s. Mao says many people in the community are still plagued by nightmares and post-traumatic stress – they may have stomachaches they can't explain, or mistake celebratory fireworks for wartime bombs.

Between wariness of Western doctors and the stigma associated with mental health issues, many Cambodian-Americans are reluctant to seek treatment, according to Leakhena Nou, a sociology professor at California State University in Long Beach. Nou has studied Cambodian populations in both the U.S. and Cambodia.

Instead, emotional distress often manifests in other ways. Nou says Cambodian-Americans have high rates of diabetes and stroke, as well as problems with drug addiction, alcoholism and family violence.

“There are lingering effects of this trauma,” Nou says. “When you cut yourself, a deep cut, and there's a scar – no matter what you try to do, the scar remains. That's how I see the state of mind for the Cambodians.”

Mao hopes the oral history project will accomplish three things: raise public awareness of the Khmer Rouge atrocities, help Cambodian-American youth understand where their families came from, and give Khmer Rouge survivors some catharsis so the community can begin to mend.

“The process of talking itself, the process of hearing the story – it's a healing process,” Mao says.

Of course, remembering can be traumatic in itself. Nou says that some refugees are afraid to tell their stories, especially in public forums, because “there is still a real fear that the Khmer Rouge will come back and harm them.”



At a training workshop for participants in the oral history project, one grandmother said she'd been interviewed about her Khmer Rouge experience before. The first time she dredged up the memories, she said, she broke into a week-long fever. Physical reactions are not uncommon, according to Mao.

“At first they have chest pains and anguish, and they can’t talk without tears,” she said. “The more they talk, the more they feel free of the burden.”

- The project is personal for Mao, who herself came to Oregon as a Khmer Rouge refugee in 1981. Though she was already 13 years old when she left with her mother, Mao says she doesn’t remember anything about Cambodia except that she wanted to forget.

“The only memory I have of coming to America is being ashamed of where I came from,” says Mao, now 41. “As a teenager, you don’t want to remember that kind of thing, so I blocked everything out and tried to assimilate ... when where you come from, all you know is starvation, killing and poverty, you want to move away from that.”

Mao’s mother never told her about the Khmer Rouge years. Only after her mother’s death six years ago did Mao learn from her stepfather, whom her mother did talk to, what had happened.

At 8, Mao now knows, she was separated from her mother and two siblings and sent to a village to be reeducated. There, Mao squirreled away bits of food to bring to her mother, starving in another camp, on the rare visits they were allowed.

“I had a better life than her because I had food,” Mao says. “Not enough food, but more than her.”

When Vietnamese forces ousted the Khmer Rouge and liberated camps in 1979, Mao was reunited with her mother. Mao's mother held her by the hand and carried her young sister as they walked 30 miles from the village to the city in search of relatives. When they arrived, they learned that Mao's aunt and younger brother had both perished – her brother had been malnourished and succumbed to an infection in his ankle.

Soon after, Mao's sister fell ill and also died. The country was still in chaos. When she tells this part of the story, Mao tears up at the thought of her mother, alone and afraid with only her one daughter left.

“I just can't imagine how scary it is,” she says. “All of the family were gone.”

Like many thousands of others, they fled to a refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border. In 1981, a relative in Oregon sponsored their visa, and they immigrated to Milwaukie. Mao earned money doing yardwork to help her mother make ends meet, and she did all she could to fit in. In high school, if anyone asked, she said she was Filipino, not Cambodian.

Mao says it took years for her to move past her shame and engage with the Cambodian-American community. When she did, she realized many of her fellow refugees shared her emotional struggles.



Now, she says, she understands that “we have a beautiful country. What happened was not our fault. It's what the government did.”

Without her mother to fill in the details, Mao's story remains patchy. Now that she has sons of her own, she wishes she could tell them more than what she's heard second-hand.

“You don’t realize until they’re gone,” she says. “I didn’t know what happened, and then my mom passed away. So ... my history is gone.

The first trial of a Khmer Rouge leader began this February, 30 years after the regime was removed from power. Kaing Guek Eav, known as Duch, oversaw a prison where up to 20,000 people were brutally tortured and sent to a killing field. Charged with crimes against humanity, he is the first of five Khmer Rouge commandants who will be called before a United Nations-backed tribunal in Cambodia. Pol Pot died under house arrest in 1998.

Mao has invited one of the trial’s prosecutors to join a panel discussion when the documentary is screened in August. Nou, the sociologist, says CACO’s oral history project fits in with a larger effort to involve Cambodian-Americans in the process of seeking out truth and justice.

After another workshop to prep the young documentarians, filming will begin in April. Christina Sek, a 16 year-old with a ready smile and a long twist of dark hair, is excited about interviewing her father. Sek was born in the States, and she knows her father came here from Cambodia, but most of his past is a mystery.

“I know that he has scars on his body,” she says, “so I assume those didn’t happen in the U.S.” Sek says she never asked her father about his past because she knew it was painful, but she thinks talking to him for the documentary will bring them closer together. “I’m just excited to hear a part of him that I’ve never heard before,” she says.

Chanly Bob, CACO’s board chairman, intends to interview his 80 year-old mother. Now 35, Bob remembers some of the six months he spent in a refugee camp in the Phillippines before immigrating to Albany, Ore., at age 8. But most of the memories lie with his mother, who shies away from talking about the Khmer Rouge.

Bob says he knows there are some stories he’ll probably never hear, because they’re too difficult for his mother to tell, but he wants to preserve as many of her experiences as he can for future generations.

“Before it’s too late, I want to make sure that her struggles, her history, her horrors, anything beautiful that she remembers ... that I know it,” Bob says. “It’ll be a lost treasure when we don’t know what happened.”

For his part, Sochanny Meng hopes his children will hear his story and understand how lucky they are.

“My people ... they had no school, they had no food, they had no money to support themselves,” he says, pausing to find the English words that match his thoughts. “I hope in the future my people might be better than before.”